

Colleen Harris History



Brigham Young University School of Music
Professor of Vocal Performance, 1970 -91
Interview June 25, 2008

Mike Ohman: Tell us a little bit about your background.

Colleen: I grew up in Chandler, Arizona. While I was younger, well up until about the 7th grade, I took piano lessons so that I would be able to accompany myself while I sang. I have always been a highly motivated creature and was the valedictorian in the 8th grade, and again in high school.

When I was 17 years old, I attended BYU on a full scholarship. The reason I went to BYU was so that I could study with Madsen. However, by the time I arrived she had already retired. This didn't stop me and I would walk down to her house so that I could study with her. While at BYU, I majored in Italian and music and minored in French and social studies. I was always ambitious. I also had a recital when I was a freshman because I was so used to doing them. I also did operas with Newell Waight and even did one opera after I graduated.

You participated in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir right?

I did. I aced the test because of my background in music and participated with them for 12 years. I had unbelievable experiences while doing that. I truly believe that the Lord just uses you for his purposes. He puts you where people need you. I had so many of those kinds of experiences. One that touched me was a student I had for a bit, and then she disappeared. One day I had a solo for the choir and after she sent me a note and told me that she was just about to take her own life, but felt impressed to turn on the television, and saw me singing. She then decided that she wasn't going to take her own life. Isn't that just amazing? I also got to travel many interesting places with the choir. I remember travelling to Japan on two different occasions.

I attended Northwestern for graduate school along with Jerry and we both graduated together. While there I participated in all of the operas.

What did you teach while at BYU?

I taught women's chorus and private voice lessons while at BYU. I taught there for 18 years. I have students all over the world now. They often call me and ask about various exercises we used to do in the class.

An experience I remember was during the time I was teaching women's chorus. It was the dedication of the Ellsworth Center where they did animal husbandry. My group was asked to sing for the ceremony. Afterwards the president came into our class and personally thanked us for a beautiful performance.

Did you ever give any public speeches during your time here?

No, I didn't give any public speeches, but I did perform at devotionals and other events like that.

What are you doing musically now?

I am the director for a community choir of old women. We go around and sing at rest homes. This has been a great experience because of the ability music has to change the heart. The nurses at the homes often comment and ask us how we do it, because people who haven't said anything and have been unresponsive for some time suddenly start to open up. Music has the ability to do that.

I want you both to know that you have made significant contributions to the BYU School of Music. You have left a mark. The improvements you have made have had a lasting effect.